

## **Lapses in History: Appropriating the Past from the Select Works of Amitav Ghosh**

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### **Abstract**

Writing History generally involves inscribing onto the past some local variant of European modernity. All other histories are variations of the master narrative, the logic of which is oriented towards European modernity and other histories are channeled through its categories. Any divergence from the European norm “can be measured and placed on a sliding scale of difference that is usually figured in terms of ‘distance’, deviation’ and ‘lack’”. In most of the novels, Ghosh has explored the erased histories that lack the European logic and the paper focuses on how he appropriates the past in dealing with the missed stories and what he has discovered in his new narrations.

**KEYWORDS:** European logic, deviation, distance, history, Modernity.

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The putative universalism of the ‘Great Past’ as it has been called by the historian Robert Berkhofer, is an ideological veil, projecting itself into the past of the particular concerns of a particular society, namely modern Europe. “Writing History involves”, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, “inscribing onto the past some local variant of European modernity”. Throughout his career, Amitav Ghosh has sought to locate the ‘lost’ stories of the ‘other’ pasts that have yielded to the historical necessity of the higher narrative of the Great Past. Abrogating the force of the European centrality and its authenticity is the purpose of his exploration into the Past, for which he has sought the partial and discontinuous elements in the Past that disrupt the totality and render it incomplete.

Each of his works directs towards ‘unofficial’ or ‘marginalized’ episodes in the historical record. The history of science and pseudo science and their deployment has been explored in *The Circle of Reason*. The forgotten history of the communal riots, vanished from the official histories of the nation (India) and the state (Calcutta) as they disrupt its logic, has been sought for in *The Shadow Lines* and Ghosh examines the ways in which the nation-states are compelled to forget the lost history and retrieve it through the sum of the fragmentary narrative pieces of the accounts given by other characters in the novel.

In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh tries to recover the lost history of the medieval Indian Ocean trade that has been obscured by the map of modern knowledge. He rewrites the history of modern science in *The Calcutta Chromosome* by reinscribing the excised contributions of non-western knowledge systems and colonized peoples. *The Glass Palace* focuses on the history of the Indian National Army in Malaya and the forgotten long march of Indian refugees

from Burma in 1941. In *The Hungry Tide*, he recalls a marginalized episode that has been untraceable in the coercive history of India, namely the Morchjhapi incident.

To abrogate the Past and appropriate it by reappraising the historical significance of 'other pasts' he uses a number of stratagems. One of the most frequent figures in Ghosh's writing, is the presence of the palimpsest. According to Ghosh, history itself is a palimpsest with a 'dense layer of accretions'. For instance, the archive in *An Antique Land* is itself figured as, "for more than eight centuries papers continued to accumulate inside the Genizia". It is metaphorically becoming a rubbish dump, which now is an important site in Cairo's history beneath which lie large quantities of Chinese pottery and valuable documents of Indian textiles. Migrant habitations in East London in *The Shadow Lines* are like palimpsests obscuring traces of the others: the 'chapel-like' building, once a synagogue is now a mosque; the anti-racism poster is buried under a riot of posters advertising Hindi films. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, under the disguise of Romen Holder and Mrs. Aatounion, lie Laakhan and Mangla. The façade is a gesture towards the palimpsest.

To explore the affective histories that account for the plural ways of being in the world, Ghosh uses certain elements of the fantastic mode, the idea of which he derives from the historian Chakrabarty with whom he is involved in the 'Subaltern projects'. Chakrabarty suggests, "Fantastical or magic-realist modes offer the best prospects". To him, "non-sociological mode of translation lends easily to fiction". Many haunted memories in Ghosh's works are a case in point in this connection. The slightly fantastic nature of *The Circle of Reason* accommodates the supernatural especially in the second section. The presence of the ghost is a signifier of the presence of the past. This dialectic between absence and presence shows the ghostly presence of the archive. While *The Glass Palace* introduces a supernatural episode in which a phantom elephant kills a planter, Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* encounters a ghost in the form of a tiger on the island of Ganrjontola.

To identify the presence of subalternity in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh utilizes silence, the presence of which can be traced out in the space 'in-between'. This means reading 'between the lines' and identify the moments in the *Memoirs of Ross*, the scientist, that disrupt colonial knowledge. The narrative commences with a disruptive moment as AVA fails to recognize a fragment of an ID card. The title of Murgan's scientific paper 'Certain Systematic Discrepancies in Ronald Ross's account of Plasmodium B' shows his glimpse of the possibility of the subaltern past. The introduction of oral testimony ("the text was too corrupt to do a continuous image conversion the best she could do was a verbal rendition".) is a self-conscious effort to refrain from translating the subaltern past into a document that could be assimilated into the idioms of historical discourse.

Memory is another channel that is more adequate than history in certain ways. As Anshmun Mondal points out, "'History' is ...a particular form of relationship with the past that privileges certain kinds of narrative about it, whilst memory, personal or collective, conceives the past in different ways...Memory's past operates tangentially to the recorded pasts of official history, intersecting it

and disrupting it, revealing its gaps and fissures''. The communal riot is figured here in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a subaltern past. In the case of personal memory that shows the change of personality or some sort of realization in Tridib and other characters in the novel, it is appropriate to recall the words of Nandita Sinha, "the past lives in the present and that the present is shaped by the past or as the novel puts it, 'the past is concurrent with the present' ''.

When the memories of characters are less sufficient, Ghosh utilizes things such as letters, diaries, schedules...etc as French historian Pierre Nora points out, "we are less able to recall without archival assistance". The reappearance of the once lost diary of Kanai's uncle in *The Hungry Tide* and the 'Memoirs' of Ronaldo Ross in *The Calcutta Chromosome* provide 'textual effect' within the discourse showing the intractable disturbance.

On the one hand, when he is searching for the last 'culture of accommodation' in *In an Antique Land*, the archive gives him only some clues about the slave's name. The space (B-M-A) needs filling. Here he utilizes etymology to search for his real name. Ghosh says, "History had been blocked by an intractable puzzle: the mystery of his name". As Derek Attridge points out, "There is something inherent in the practice of etymology itself, an anti-historicist element which identifies and exposes discontinuities''. In the end, he only provides 'speculative proofs' to settle the matter instead of creating a spur towards further speculation. Instead of withdrawing from the stage, he is leaping into the realms of speculation by providing the fictional excess that supplements the discourse of the historian.

On the other hand, the categories of evidence in the archive are sometimes utilized in a quite unproblematic way, here it is appropriate to recall Ghosh's own words, "I knew that if my own memories had not been preserved in such artifacts as notes and diaries, the past would not have much purchase on my mind either". There is some inclination and humanism towards historicism whenever necessary.

Another kind of reading that explores the works of Ghosh and brings to light the dialogic relation between the past and the present is an ethnographic allegory in James Clifford's sense, "a form that uses the past to speak indirectly about the present". According to James Clifford, the paradigm shift in anthropology from "the study of separate, authentic cultures to comparative intercultural studies" has been to foreground the 'literariness of ethnography'. The ethnographic reading is much effective as Ghosh, an anthropologist, freely moving between anthropology, history and fiction to an extent in which traditional boundaries have themselves broken down.

The Imam and the Indian describes the expectations of an anthropologist doing field work in an Egyptian village, assuming that it belongs to a settled culture. Instead, men of the village 'dwell in travel' and have all busy restlessness of airline passengers.

Similarly, In *The Circle of Reason*, Alu who leaves home from a village in Calcutta to Al-Ghazaria stands for tradition and Balaram who lives in the same village near Calcutta is for progress as he is obsessed with Western knowledge. Anthony Burgess argues, "That the novel juxtaposes stable cultures with a

diasporic, post-colonial culture is a reading within the paradigm of classical ethnography.’’ The village they live, though looking as the symbol for tradition, is itself the product of a diaspora, where refugees from East Pakistan settled in 1971. The last episode is an allegory about the cultural logic of global capitalism destroying the ancient trading cultures of the Middle East.

From the beginning of the novel *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh attempts to subvert what Sara Suleri has called ‘The Rhetoric of India’. Unlike the colonial novel in which westerners travel in India to observe an ancient culture, an Indian is traveling to Britain which is at war with Germany, showing the background of an equally unstable Europe; Ghosh here undermines any distinction between East and West.

As Anshuman Mondal aptly observes, “Ghosh’s works straddle the border between history and fiction and it is from the indeterminate site that they attempt the impossible double-task of writing historically about pasts that could not have been articulated through historical discourse in the first place.”

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